

WORKING PAPER 34 – **Political Killings, Violence, Elections and Democracy in South Asia: The Case of Bangladesh**

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Abstract

By political killings and violence we mean the use of force by a given group with a political purpose or motivation. The phenomenon is nothing new in democratic politics. Particularly, in the political history of South Asia, political killings and violence are much-discussed topics. This paper is about political killings in post-independent Bangladesh and stresses on the period of 1971-1975, when the founding father of Bangladesh was brutally killed along with almost all members of his family. Since then, an alarming rise in the number of political killings and grassroots, large-scale violence during both pre-and post-elections has left voters across the country fearing for their lives. Human rights groups fear that the crisis is to become worse in this period of political contests. The paper also discusses how the beginning of political killings in post-liberation Bangladesh continues across society – with uncontrolled political conflict resulting in the foulest incidents of violence, corruption and democratic erosion, the decay of development process and governance, a ‘culture of fear’ (Nandy, 2012: 165-176) and, above all, attempts to basic human rights.

Key Words: Killings, Violence, Conflict, Democracy, Elections, Rule of Law,

Human Rights, Governance, Development, Corruption, Bangladesh, South Asia.

Introduction and Background

Violence and inequality are rampant – not only in South Asian, developing countries, but also in the developed world. Data from U.S.A. police suggests homicides rose seven percent in 2021. And while many Americans know that 2020 was a particularly bloody year—with homicides surging 29 percent, of which 77 percent involved firearms—few realize that gun violence has been rising across this country since 2014 (Thomas and Others, 2022). Nordic countries like Sweden, Norway, and Finland are still living exceptions. The most reliable violence statistics, those on homicides and violent mortality, show that in a global comparison, all Nordic countries score relatively low (Jukka and Other 2009: 1-95). On the other side of the pole, countries like Colombia in Latin America are constantly pointing fingers at how social violence can damage the path to development. The Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region has the undesirable distinction of being the world's most violent region, with 24.7 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants. The magnitude of the problem is both staggering and persistent. Of the top 50 most violent cities in the world, 42 are in LAC (Laura, 2017). Importantly, social conflict and political violence in Africa is a complex subject. A growing fraction of the world's civil wars break out on the African continent, which in the last few decades has acquired a reputation as a hotbed of violence and warfare (Driscoll, 2009).

So, there is a raising concern among researchers: is conflict a problem *for* development, or a failure *of* development? Many experts have also explored how and to what extent social and political violence makes the road to development difficult (Iyer and Ghani, 2010). When we see the presence of violence in democracies, the first thing that is evident is the rise of corruption and the fragile state of both the developmental process, good governance, and human rights. In particular, the erosion of democratic governance, the breakdown of political institutions, the loss of the rule of law, and the dangers of poor, marginalized and minority communities come to the fore. Expert analysis also show that in India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, conflict is often

concentrated in more lagging regions. Conflict rates are higher in the lagging regions of Pakistan (Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, and the North-West Frontier Province), India (Maoist insurgency in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Orissa), Sri Lanka (North), and Nepal. Lagging regions have experienced over three times the number of terrorist incidents per capita than those observed in leading regions, and almost twice as many deaths per head of population in such incidents (Iyer and Ghani, 2010).

Considering these critical contexts, speaking of violence in democracy is difficult primarily because of the diverse and often contradictory ways used to describe very different types of action, from insult to stringent physical constraint. It is almost impossible to speak of violence without specifying precisely what is meant by the term. On the other hand, the use of the word violence within a political system is instead over determined: everything which falls outside the democratic space is said to be violent, and all that is violent is excluded from the political arena. So, in the social conditions of inequality, discrimination, impoverishment, corruption and disaffiliation that mark the daily life of a growing proportion of the lower classes, this use of the word serves in practice to disqualify certain modes of action and to defend the existing order (Merklen, 2012: 75-73).

Schwarzmantel (2010) sets out a number of central questions which should be kept in mind in any discussion regarding the relationship between democracy and violence. Democracy aims at the exclusion of violence, and theoretically should render violence unnecessary, since all groups and individuals should be able to express their views and interests through a process of rational deliberation. Yet this is obviously not always the case. The democratic state, like any other, uses violence when necessary to maintain itself in existence and to resist those violent movements that reject democratic processes. The danger is that such use of violence may escape democratic control and undermine the very foundational rights supposedly being defended. Some contemporary democracies are challenged by violent movements, but these are in many cases above all expressions of a demand for recognition and inclusion. The question thus must be probed regarding how democratic societies should respond to such challenges. It is suggested that institutional reform and a new political discourse should be important elements of such a response.

Therefore, it is, indeed, very important to understand and identify ‘violent conflicts’ in a stable democracy - most practically in South Asian societies where various types of conflicts develop, from politics to culture, regarding religion or social structures. For instance India, the motherland of the Non-Violence Movement, has experienced numerous, often most violent conflicts since its independence. Starting from the tremendous violence witnessed at the time of partition in 1947, religious riots occur even much after entering into 21st century. We all still acutely remember the Gujarat riots of 2002, perhaps the worst of all riots in independent India. Apart from religious riots, India also experiences various kinds of violent conflicts in the line of caste and class-related conflicts. This is in spite the fact that India is one of the rare developing countries so far able to maintain democratic institutions (Kazuya, 2010: 1). Apart from this crucial case (Ashutosh, 2002; Iyer and Ghani, 2010), the South Asian region, as a whole, is the second most violent place on earth after Iraq. While conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan have attracted global attention, parts of India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal have also experienced long-running conflicts. The result is human misery, destruction of infrastructure and social cohesion, not to mention death. The knock-on effects are huge. Thus, it is more problematic to categorize political violence and killings in a democratic setup such as that witnessed in South Asian countries.

In the current political scenario, it is evident that Democracy in South Asia has taken an unusual path, much diverting from the ideal theoretical model; this might have caused some violent conflicts in the region as a whole – involving both states and non-state actors. In every election season in South Asian countries, a heated political situation emerges ahead of the elections. Opposition parties confront the government on the ground with all their might – demanding free, fair and participatory elections. According to Freedom House, the ruling Awami League (AL) has consolidated political power through sustained harassment of the opposition (and perceived allies), as well as of critical media and various voices across civil society (Freedom House, 2023). Corruption is endemic, and anti-corruption efforts have been weakened by politicized enforcement. Due-process guarantees are poorly upheld, and security forces violate human rights with near impunity. Violence and discrimination against religious minorities and refugees,

particularly the Rohingya who have fled Myanmar, are significant problems (Freedom House, 2023).

It's most important that international powers have also faced each other on the issue of free, fair and peaceful elections in Bangladesh. Violence around elections increasingly captures the attention of donors and practitioners, who invest growing resources into enhancing the safety and security of democratic practices around the world. Concerned over the continuing patterns of violence surrounding elections, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) recently commissioned a study¹ regarding the causes of electoral violence and the best practices available for its prevention.

Undoubtedly, the failure to conduct peaceful, fair, inclusive, credible, peaceful (Sahoo and Ghosh, 2022) and acceptable elections in India and Pakistan (in 76 years) and Bangladesh (in 52 years) constitutes a major challenge to the democratic system and good governance, which unfortunately also gives opportunity for external forces to indirectly interfere in local politics. The manifold effects and reactions of these crises in electoral politics may become sharply visible in the coming days – in the field of regional politics as well.

The US government and a section of the country's lawmakers continue to increase pressure on Sheikh Hasina's ruling government to restore democracy and ensure fair elections in Bangladesh. On its side, China has come forward to protect the authoritarian behavior by the current government. Thus, a question emerges – what do these opposite positions by the United States and China hold for the future of Bangladesh? Most obviously, Bangladesh is being dragged into the new Sino-US 'Great Game'; this is where the two superpowers are preparing to face each other. On June 14 (2023), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China's spokesperson described the recent action by the United States as interference in the internal affairs of Bangladesh in an interview given to the country's leading media Global Times. Without naming the United States, the China's spokesperson Wang Wenbin said

¹To see the full report, visit:
<https://www.afsc.org/electoralviolencereport>

that a country has been interfering in the internal affairs of Bangladesh and other developing countries under the pretext of democracy and human rights for a long time. Expressing support for the Hasina government, the Chinese spokesperson said that China strongly supports Bangladesh in safeguarding its sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity, independently adopting both domestic and foreign policies, and pursuing development paths that suit its national reality. China has never directly condemned the US policy towards Bangladesh before. However, in 2021, China's ambassador to Dhaka warned Bangladesh of the "serious consequences" of joining the Quad. Notably, Bangladesh joined China's Belt and Road Initiative in 2016. The upcoming election in Bangladesh seems to have garnered significant attention from superpowers due to its strategic geopolitical location and its potential impact on regional stability. Bangladesh, with its sizable population and vigorous economic growth, has become a key player in South Asia. Its stability and democratic governance are crucial for maintaining peace and security in the region. Moreover, the country's strategic positioning, with its proximity to the Bay of Bengal, makes it an important player in maritime geopolitics. Superpowers have a vested interest in ensuring that Bangladesh remains politically stable and adheres to democratic principles (Panday, 2023).

The Case of Bangladesh

Over the years, Bangladesh has indeed positioned itself as a solid and influential player on the international stage. It has achieved remarkable economic growth and development, impressively reduced poverty levels and expanded its global trade footprint. Its commitment to democratic principles and hosting of regular elections has contributed to its reputation as a stable and democratic nation. Furthermore, Bangladesh has actively engaged in various regional forums and partnerships, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), thereby strengthening its diplomatic ties and influence in the region. Consequently, the outcome of Bangladeshi elections holds implications not only for the country itself but also for the broader stability and dynamics of broader South Asia, thus attracting the attention and involvement of superpowers.

Bangladesh's increasing prominence on the global stage has compelled

superpowers to take a more proactive stance on various matters concerning the country. A striking example of this is the heightened interest shown by the United States in Bangladeshi politics in recent months. The U.S. government has taken a significant step by implementing a new visa policy. This development underscores the intricate geopolitical dynamics at play as various superpowers deliberate on their roles in the forthcoming elections.

Both the causes and characteristics of political violence in Bangladesh are distinct from those of its neighbors. Generally speaking, ethnic and communal riots are evident in Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but not in Bangladesh. There is also nothing along the lines of India's communal and caste problems. However, whether Bangladesh is dangerously transforming itself from a country prone to political violence to a country prone to high levels of political terrorism has become a big question. On the other hand, impunity, extrajudicial killings, disappearances, and social terrorism are increasingly alarming – and the lack of tolerance between the main political parties is increasing. The use of firearms and loss of life in electoral violence is becoming an almost regular occurrence, and this just as Bangladesh is becoming a middle-income country (out of the LDC list) upon the completion of 50 years of independence.

So, what is political killing and violence – and how is it different from other forms of violence or criminal activities? Political scientists (Schwarzmantel, 2011) have defined political killings and violence by looking at motives, timing, actors, and activities which differentiate them from other forms of violence (such as criminal violence and offences). Again, by political killings and violence we mean the use of force by a group with a political purpose or motivation. One can further differentiate among types of political violence, such as election-related violence or post-election violence (Höglund, 2009). In many countries across the world, democracy and political violence can be seen as inseparable. The issue of “violence” plays an important role in modern political life – because democracies are not defined by their ability to exclude violence from the political sphere. The conceptual pairing of violence and politics structures the framework of political thought. Many authors blend the two concepts, while others radically separate them (Arendt, 1972: 105-187). Social sciences are confronted with a new situation which calls for an examination of the border between violence and politics (Merklen,

2012: 57-73); however, Bangladesh indeed presents a unique case.

Bangladesh's political landscape is regularly marked by various kinds of conflicts, which at times culminate into incidents of violence. The birth of Bangladesh is so deeply intertwined with violence that it is hard to separate the two. An estimated one million Bengalis died in the military repression that lasted until the defeat of Pakistan in December 1971. Estimates of the number killed by the Pakistan army and allied militias vary widely, from under 30,000 to over three million; a "consensus figure given in most accounts is that close to a million people died during the conflict" (Lewis, 2011; Bass, 2013). Since then, killings, conflict and violence have remained inseparable from Bangladeshi politics and society (Datta, 2005). Between 1972 and 1975, the actions by the armed young force *Gonobaini*, left-wing radicalism, and state-sponsored violence were all testimonies of the preponderance of political violence (Ahmed, 2012).

The genocidal violence by the politically motivated Pakistani Army, the consequent liberation struggle and the war of independence that marked the birth of the nation in 1971 have all become major components of Bangladesh politics. Political killings, conflict and violence have always been a characteristic of political unrest – and this is spite that Bangladesh is a Parliamentary Democratic and densely populated country in South Asia. In terms of killings, in the first three years of Bangladeshi independence, there were over 3000 political deaths (Valio, 1976). After 1975, except for the assassination of President Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975 and President Ziaur Rahman in 1981, killing for direct political motives was extremely common – as Bangladesh's political system has vacillated not only between military and democratic rule, but also between presidential and parliamentary forms of government. In 1975, the Mujib-led parliament amended the 1972 constitution to replace the parliamentary system with a presidential one. The Zia and Ershad regimes retained the presidential system, which tilted power to the head of state, with rubber-stamp parliaments intended more to legitimise the military rule than to provide a framework for public participation in lawmaking or for the redress of grievances. These parliaments were also short-lived. In fact, the first parliament to survive a full term did so in 1996, 25 years after independence (Ahmed, 2012). The political culture shaped within East Pakistan sowed the seeds

of repression, political turmoil and preference for violent protests (Hasanuzzaman, 1998). This continued after independence under the emerging democratic rule. However, a series of military coups following Mujib's assassination considered the use of force as a means of political change, thereby perverting the democratic process and constitutional politics (Mahfuz, 1994).

When independent Bangladesh was just beginning its journey as a new state, it faced a mountain of problems associated with political instability, social conflict, and violence. In this situation, political leaders were also part of a deep conspiracy originated both within and outside the country. The first President of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and most of his family were killed during the early hours of 15 August 1975 by a group of young Bangladeshi Army personnel, who invaded his Dhanmondi 32 residence as part of a Coup d'État. Minister of Commerce Khondaker Mostaq Ahmad immediately took control of the government and proclaimed himself President. The assassination marked the first direct military intervention in Bangladesh's civilian administration-centric politics (Mascarenhas, 1986). After the killing of Sheikh Mujib, the coup leaders were overthrown in a counter coup by Brigadier Khaled Musharraf. The assassins were to be sent into exile; however, before they left they decided to kill the four leaders imprisoned in Dhaka Central Jail. Vice-President Syed Nazrul Islam, former Prime Minister of Bangladesh Tajuddin Ahmed and Captain (Rtd.) Mansur Ali, as well as former Home Minister A. H. M. Quamruzzaman were all shot and bayoneted by army officials inside Old Dhaka Central Jail (Khatib, 1982). Later, the killing of four national leaders created new wounds – and these brutal killings created new areas of conflict. Further, on 21 August, 2004 a massive grenade attack created a wall in politics.

The Case of 15th August, 1975

History tells us that Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib returned to his dream Bangladesh via Britain and India after his release from a Pakistani prison on 10 January, 1972. At that time, he was bright with the conviction of rebuilding the dream of Bangladesh, achieved through the success of a very long and arduous movement. He started another chapter of his life to rebuild 'Sonar Bangla' (Golden Bengal) then utterly devastated by the war. Many thought Mujib would not be able to run

the state, because he was no longer a party leader but the undisputed leader of the entire people of Bangladesh. Yet he became the head of government for the sake of Bengalis and to bring Bangladesh forward with strong leadership. Soon after assuming power, his government announced the 'Bangladesh Collaborator (Special Tribunal) Ordinance 1972' on 24 January 1972. As of October 31, 1973, 37,471 people were accused under this ordinance. 2 thousand 848 cases were settled. Only 752 collaborators and Pakistani agents were received. On November 30, 1973, Mujib announced a General Amnesty (Ahmed, 1983).

At the same time, Bangabandhu focused on rebuilding the war-torn country's economy and democratic governance structure. By nationalizing industries, he brought 85 percent of industrial production under government control (Islam, 1988). Meanwhile, in 1972, lack of rainfall in northern and eastern Bangladesh led to a severe drought and recession, a severe setback for the nearly war-torn country. Drought-induced famines obviously create multi-faceted social and economic problems, which meant for the government a very tough challenge to address. Despite administrative chaos and limited state finances, the government made all-out efforts to combat the famine. However, dissatisfaction with the lack of political stability for the post-war situation, led by both far-right and far-left extremist parties, was simmering (Jahan, 2017; Talukder, 1980).

At the same time, conflict and age-old struggle began to accumulate in both the civil and military administration – on one side of which were the officers and employees who were in favor of the liberation war and against those who had returned to Pakistan. Note that the number of Bengali soldiers working in the Pakistan Army at that time was approximately 50 thousand. About 30,000 of them were detained in Pakistan. There were 14-15 thousand soldiers in Bangladesh, many wounded and killed in the war – the remaining war casualties, crippled and war-weary. It was not possible for them to prevent the dominance and action by these individuals and groups. As a result, the power of the opponents of freedom and of the Liberation War increased at all levels of the administration, which started to embarrass and sabotage the government in various ways (Ahmed, 1983).

In this situation, the first General Election was held on March 7, 1973, under the

new government of the new country. The election was very significant for strengthening and maintaining the democratic trend – as well as the Bangabandhu government's expression of confidence and faith in democracy. Elections in the war-torn country could not be 100% free from controversy. Opposition parties also faced various criticisms regarding the elections. It was very natural that the ruling Awami League would get a huge victory after leading the war (Solaiman, 1988). On the other hand, the opposition failed to get the expected results, in part because they did not hold elections as a united front. The parties that lost the elections became highly critical and agitating, and some extreme groups started sabotage activities. As a result, in 1972, the Awami League government formed a new armed organization called 'Jatiya Rakhibahini' to control the law-and-order situation. Moreover, the distance and differences between these new forces were also developed in relation to other forces (Talukder, 1975).

Despite all this, the government strived to run the country in a constitutional order. The democratic march of the Parliamentary System continued, with the scars of war, through constitution making and elections. Such an achievement stands as an example for post-war countries. However, various government institutions in the country were fragile, conflicts abounded and law and order was fragile, as were dynamics in administration, civil society and politics. The government tried to maintain the rule of law through the various conflicts. However, as a result of the disintegration of the Government Party's student body, a new party, the Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD), was formed on 31 October 1972. It soon started strongly opposing politics. Even after dealing with these, the government continued with various policies and constructive programs for the country. The breakthrough in the field of education, Dr. Qudrat-e-Khudar's Education Commission, constitutes a good example. The government signed an India-Bangladesh Treaty, which was sharply criticized by the opposition. The anti-government movement grew in momentum, talking about corruption, nepotism and leading to a nationwide movement. A state of emergency was declared on 28 December 1974 to control the situation. As a result, fundamental rights were suspended. 27 days later, on January 25, 1975, the Fourth Amendment to the Constitution was brought. On June 7, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League, or BAKSAL, was formed as a single national party in the country, in which representatives of various professions such

as politicians, teachers, soldiers, bureaucrats etc. were taken. This was named the 'Second Revolution' (Ahmad, 1980; Choudury, 1993)

Researchers believe that Mujib started the 'second revolution' to deal with the adverse internal situation. Said situation seemed somewhat under control. There was some stability in commodity prices and in the economy overall. Meanwhile, on September 1, the 'Second Revolution', i.e. the new administrative system under the 'BAKSAL system', was supposed to begin. Yet before that, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was killed along with his family on August 15.

Four months after the brutal incident of Bangabandhu's murder, the main four national leaders of the liberation war were killed, unarmed, while in jail on November 3: these were Syed Nazrul Islam, Tajuddin Ahmad, Captain Mansoor Ali, and A. H. M. Kamruzzaman. Each of these names was closely associated with the Freedom Struggle and Mujib's politics. After 25 long years engaged in the pursuit of awakening the Bengali nationalist spirit, they sacrificed their lives for the liberation of the nation during the first nine months of independence. By killing these leaders in the absence of Mujib, who was imprisoned in Pakistan, it was "understood that the anger of the killers was not limited to his family. His political ideals and the people associated with those ideals were also the target of their outrage" (Khan, 2015:219). Later, the terror attack on an anti-terrorism rally at Bangabandhu Avenue on August 21, 2004, which killed over two dozen people, not only rocked the vicinity due to the impact of the grenades hurled at the event; it shook the country to its core. August 21 had been an evil plot to assassinate the then opposition leader Sheikh Hasina, nearly 20 years after the butchering of most of her family members, including the sitting president and Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, and thereby wipe out the Party from politics. The 21 August grenade attack has created a wall in politics (Mohiuddin Ahmad, 2023).

Apart from politics, at least seventeen coup attempts and the assassination of another President of Bangladesh, Ziaur Rahman, in 1981, prolonged the military rule of General Ershad. The execution of prominent army personnel in military court during the military period has also caused a great shock to the democratic

aspirations of Bangladesh's civil society. Again, the general public was looking at the results of the trial of General Ershad, who was accused of murdering General Manzoor – along with Zia's murder. But this trial was mysteriously stalled. After the fall of Ershad in December 1990, the prospect of a two-party political system based on the rule of law in Bangladesh had vanished. Bangladesh is currently going through a bloody transition to democracy. The continuing deterioration of healthy relations between the two main political parties, are making the entire democracy and governance institutions of Bangladesh less effective, indeed fragile. Due to the lack of good governance, rule of law and democracy, as well as the spread of intolerance in all sectors of society, violence is no longer limited to bombings, small-scale gunfights or setting fire to government vehicles or property. Once upon a time, if someone was killed, the surrounding village or area would become stagnant or depopulated. No one can imagine that in Bangladesh now. The character of political violence has changed fundamentally in the last decade or so. The days of intimidation by bombing are over. Now target killing has increased. In the previous decade, regular violence was mainly confined to the ruling Awami League (AL) and main opposition, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which became a common phenomenon/regular practice in Bangladesh's political culture. (Now such party-level violence has decreased.) However, it has multiplied within the parties, namely the Awami League and its affiliates. In 2016, 71 of the 116 people killed in the violence of the local level elections boycotted by the BNP belonged to the Awami League. According to a report by the Centre for Law and Arbitration, 10,145 people were injured and 146 people were killed in 845 incidents of violence within the Awami League between 2013 and 2017. 1702 were injured and 14 killed in 160 incidents of BNP internal conflict. Elections are very common methods of peaceful transfer of power in democracy; like in many other developing countries, Bangladesh also follows a method of peaceful transfer of power through elections; however, electoral violence in every national and local level election is a 'serious problem' and a 'hindrance to the democratic development' in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2021:1-18).

Consequences

There are thousands of variations and complications in the democracy of Bangladesh. In terms of economy, social affairs, defense, scientific practice,

education, health etc., if you want to make laws keeping in mind all these complications, if you want to support or oppose it and join the debate, is there no minimum educational status required? If a member is not properly educated, is he not doing an injustice to his constituents? Of course, in this case, institutional education should not be blamed alone: learning the rules of the legislature, knowing some information before discussing the bill, how many people are interested in all these things? Many members are far too busy with their work related to legislative sessions; can they also be called 'educated' representatives? When legislators make rude gestures or taunts at each other, it is also lack of education — not caring about the credentials of the non-educational institutions. Discriminatory, unscientific, superstitious speech and behavior are the bedrock of democracy these days.

The revival of the question regarding educational qualifications is therefore welcome. Can a few people from each party with minimum qualifications be given a chance to take some special decisions in the legislature? Can a special class be arranged for those who are admitted into the Legislature? Whether the country is safe in the hands of illiterate and terrorist leaders, or free in the hands of so-called educated leaders, the appeal of conscience will remain at the center of the discussion. Times are changing; will the answers to these questions change as well? Bangladesh is one of the few Muslim-majority countries to have sustained procedural democracy for a significant period of time. The country is upheld as a model for other developing countries due to its gains in human development. However, Bangladesh has also drawn attention because of the intensity of its conflictual politics – and is again witnessing a rise in the number of political killings. According to a press report, an alarming rise in the number of killings of political activists in Bangladesh in disputed parliamentary polls has left grassroots campaigners across the country fearing for their lives. Labelling the arrests and subsequent deaths of activists as “extrajudicial killings”, opposition leaders have blamed the government for targeting opposition activists. Several ruling party activists have also been killed (Chowdhury, 2014). Particularly, in 2013 and 2014, Bangladesh perhaps witnessed the worst time in its history. It has experienced multidimensional, extremely violent incidents. In 2013, 507 people died as a result of political violence, while 22,407 were injured (Ain o Salish Kendra, 2014). Much of this political violence occurred during general strikes called by opposition parties to pressure the government to meet various demands. The Federation of Bangladesh

Chambers of Commerce and Industry has estimated that each strike day costs the economy over US\$200 million (Wall Street Journal, 2013). During protests, opposition party cadres clash, sometimes fatally, with both ruling party cadres and the police.

Describing an alarming rise of political killings, violence and conflict, another report published on 21 November, 2017 claimed that at least 1,028 people had been killed and 52,066 injured in 3,540 instances of political violence over the previous five years in Bangladesh. The data was released by the Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK). Politicians and commentators both say violence has been a staple of Bangladeshi politics for a long time, largely due to the inherent nature of political organisations, which is built around loyalties purchased through the distribution of spoils. Researcher, journalist and political commentator Afsan Chowdhury said: “Politics in Bangladesh is driven by money; there is nothing in it about people’s welfare and political parties carry out attacks on rival groups for issues related to money” (Raju, 2017).

According to a recent figure, published in February 2023, no less than 72 people have been killed and 7,124 injured in 499 incidents of political violence in the last 13 months. This information came up in a report presented by the Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) during a dialogue. The civil rights organisation ASK organised a dialogue with the National Human Rights Commission of Bangladesh (NHRCB). It prepared a report on the humanitarian situation in the country between January 2022 and January 2023. The organisation used information from nine newspapers, several online news portals, and the ASK database (Prothom Alo, 16 Feb 2023).

Bangladesh politics is considered highly contentious, with little scope for the opposition to make its voice heard within the formal political system. Political violence emerges from a deep-rooted political culture of intolerance, antagonism, revenge, and arrogance. While differences in opinion between parties are common in democracies, in Bangladesh these often lead to the use of extreme forms of violence resulting in death, injury and extensive damage to property. Dynastic politics and lack of democratic practices in the internal organization of political parties have contributed to the country’s prevailing situation of highly

confrontational politics. As a result, political violence remains stuck in a ‘vicious cycle’ (Hoque, 2014) whereby undemocratic practices reinforce political violence. In August 2022, Michelle Bachelet conducted the first official visit to Bangladesh by a UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. She subsequently raised several human rights concerns, including the “narrowing civic space, increased surveillance, intimidation and reprisals often leading to self-censorship” (Amnesty International, 2023).

Violence, often resulting in killings, is becoming a pervasive element in Bangladeshi politics. Supporters of different political parties, and sometimes the supporters of different factions within one party, often clash both with each other and with police during rallies and demonstrations. Awami League supporters, often with the convenience and support by the police, violently disrupted rallies and demonstrations of opposition parties – resulting in numerous deaths. Opposition parties also used armed violence and intimidation to disrupt their opponents’ gatherings and rallies, as well as to enforce general strikes. There were reports of widespread impunity for abuses and corruption by security forces. These security forces, encompassing the national police, border guards, and counterterrorism units such as the Rapid Action Battalion, maintain both internal and border security. The military, primarily the army, is responsible for national defense but also has some domestic security responsibilities. These security forces report to the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the military itself reports to the Ministry of Defense. Civilian authorities maintain effective control over security forces. Members of these security forces committed numerous abuses. Significant human rights issues include credible reports of: unlawful or arbitrary killings, including extrajudicial killings; forced disappearances; torture or cases of cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment by the government or its agents on behalf of the government; harsh and life-threatening prison conditions; arbitrary arrests or detentions; political prisoners; politically motivated reprisals against individuals in another country; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary; arbitrary or unlawful interference with privacy; punishment of family members for offenses allegedly committed by an individual; serious restrictions on free expression and the media, including violence or threats of violence against journalists, unjustified arrests or prosecutions of journalists, and censorship as well as the existence of

criminal libel and slander laws; serious restrictions on internet freedom; substantial interference with the freedom of peaceful assembly and freedom of association, including overly restrictive laws on the organization, funding, or operation of nongovernmental organizations and civil society organizations; restrictions on refugees' freedom of movement; mistreatment of refugees; serious and unreasonable restrictions on political participation; serious government corruption; government restrictions on or harassment of domestic human rights organizations; lack of investigation of and accountability for gender-based violence, including but not limited to domestic and intimate partner violence, sexual violence, child abuse, early and forced marriage, and other harmful practices; crimes involving violence or threats of violence targeting members of ethnic minority groups or indigenous people; crimes involving violence or threats of violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or intersex persons; the existence or use of laws criminalizing consensual same-sex sexual conduct between adults; significant restrictions on independent trade unions and workers' freedom of association; and the existence of the worst forms of child labor (U.S. Department of State, 2022).

Following the US Global Magnitsky human rights sanctions against Bangladesh's Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and some of its top commanders in December 2021, extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances dropped dramatically – indicating that authorities have the ability to bring abuses by security forces under control. However, instead of taking steps to implement the necessary reforms, authorities launched a campaign of threats and intimidation against human rights defenders and families of victims of enforced disappearances (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Recent developments indicate that Bangladeshi politics, especially the upcoming elections, are increasingly becoming a source of contention among global powers. In this context, Bangladesh may become the new stage of face-to-face confrontation between the United States and China. Elections are only seven months away. As a result, observers fear that the situation will become tenser. Opposition parties in Bangladesh are demanding elections under an interim caretaker government. On the other hand, the ruling party is eager to organize elections under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. The previous two elections were held under incumbents.

Development partners, the international community and election observers have alleged that those elections were heavily rigged. Charged with organizing a credible and acceptable election, again the Bangladeshi government faces pressure from multiple fronts. As the world's center of gravity is shifting to the Indo-Pacific, it is important to minimize political rivalries and tensions within South Asian Countries for the sake of overcoming emerging geopolitical risks. Building a stable balance of power in the Indo-Pacific has become more important than ever; is not possible to attain that goal without internal stability within the South Asian democratic order – including peaceful electoral processes and good governance.

Sheikh Hasina's return to power in 2009 ushered in an era of political stability and democracy in Bangladesh; the military became fully subordinated to civilian authorities, and the frequently occurring coups have returned to the barracks. The government has cracked down on extremists and also addressed Indian concerns of cross-border terrorism and extremism. In return, India has resolved its enclave and maritime disputes with Bangladesh. In what is heralded the "golden era of India-Bangladesh relations," trade between both countries has also increased from 2 billion USD in 2007 to 14 billion USD in 2022. In spite of all this, the West has continued to criticise and scrutinise Bangladesh's democracy. As Bangladesh heads to elections in 2024, there is increasing pressure from the West on Sheikh Hasina to hold "free, fair, and peaceful elections." As Bangladesh heads to elections, a few important questions regarding what opportunities and challenges does the country's economy, polity, and security confront. What contributes to the West's pressure on Bangladesh, and is it justifiable? Will the West's intervention in elections and domestic politics benefit the opposition? How will this impact India's relations with Bangladesh? To what extent can India influence its Western partners to ease pressure against Sheikh Hasina?

Unfortunately, even as the violent political movements of Bangladesh transform, as yet there lacks significant attempts to make the rule of law and adherence to ethics a major basis of any election or state campaign. Rather, the spirit of making money at any cost, establishing and winning elections is becoming more and more intense. Elections and social dominance are becoming the main drivers of political violence in contemporary Bangladesh. Bangladesh has witnessed the highest level of violence against women – even under two and a half decades of women prime

ministers. When interacting with the civil society or with those who have played a role in preventing the spread of extremism, there is an attempt to trivialize it by identifying it as a 'political agenda'. A self-contradiction or suicidal politics has thus become the inevitable destiny of Bangladesh. The 'democratic movement' in Bangladesh has always been strategic and street-based, yet it almost never gained credibility with its intention to ensure police reforms, judicial appointments and independence of the judiciary, and the effectiveness of the criminal justice system. Free and fair elections have only resulted in a change of power by democratic means. The long 'democratic movement' of Bangladesh has taken away the lives of hundreds of people. It has crippled a large number of citizens. These movements saw the destruction of both public and private property on a large scale. They have never paid attention to compensating the relatives of victims of violence. And the general tendency of street or political killings is to go unpunished. It is becoming a normal social trend for groups or groups, whatever the case may be, to give up hope for justice after someone is killed. A donor-backed draft law on police reform has been shelved by the government (Jashim Uddin, 2011). The government is giving initial thoughts regarding setting up an independent investigative body. However, the criminal justice system, which has a backlog of around 3 million cases, does not (with few exceptions) provide speedy justice. Major changes in the existing system, especially party democratization and accountability, and deradicalization programs in various sectors, need to be implemented politically. The challenge facing Bangladesh regards restoring courtesy and tolerance as a priority, and this through a pure political process aimed at ending political violence. In order to manage a peaceful South Asia and providing a strong face to the rest of the world, protecting democracy is both necessary and essential for Bangladesh.

A very disappointing feature of Bangladesh's politics, especially the upcoming national elections, which has been tense and conflict-friendly for several months now, is that representatives of civil society are unable to work for peace and reconciliation beyond political approval or party identification. Although in theory, a peaceful solution requires civil society to adopt a neutral perspective, in practice this is elusive. Almost everyone is speaking with specific goals, objectives and visions in mind. Although party politics prevails in this, 'overall public interest' is not given due importance. As a result, along with the fear of conflict, the

polarization of both civil society, civil organizations, elites and intellectuals is increasing – which in turn acts as a catalyst for increasing divisions, distances and tensions between Bangladeshi citizens.

There is nothing left as a 'buffer zone' or 'neutral zone' in Bangladesh at present. Just hearing the names of individuals, speakers, groups and newspapers, we can close our eyes and say 'which side are they on'? Unbiased statements, holistic consideration, and genuine public-interest behaviour cannot be expected from biased parties. No one is able to show the light of hope amidst the political uncertainty of Bangladesh. This is the harsh reality.

As various political parties have mobilized both civil society and intellectuals on their behalf, the international community and development partners are doing the same. As a result, civil society organizations in Bangladesh are not able to rise above their narrow party identity and group interests and show the way out to the people who are in trouble due to fear of conflict. Also missing is someone who can be proactive in providing peaceful solutions, extend a hand of compassion to all and help promote peace and stability.

It is a matter of particular misfortune that in reality there is no such acceptable person. Rather, these civil society organizations are helping to spread political violence and poison of hatred. This is accompanied by political hypocrisy and shameless brokering. Therefore, there is no light at the end of the tunnel right now. No one knows where the latent conflict ends.

History shows that only neutral leadership and dialogue between civil society and political representatives can thaw relations. However, in the current reality, there is no trace of mutual trust amongst the leadership. That's why an alternative is needed. A neutral civil society could be the right alternative. Positive change was possible through their initiative. There was a possibility of peace and reconciliation. But that hope is gradually fading.

Meanwhile, the schedule of national elections in November and voting in January, it is known about the 12th National Parliament Elections. At the same time, there is a deadlock around these elections. As there is no agreement or consensus among the parties, the voice of civil society is also not raised. A fragmented civil society is unable to organize the people to give them a voice and smooth the path to democracy through constitutional continuity.

If there is no true democracy in a promising country like Bangladesh, if the parliament is not representative of the majority of the citizenry - then public interest and development cannot be ensured. That is why fair election processes and democratic processes should continue in the country and resolve all disputes. People should be allowed to choose their leadership. Bangladesh cannot be pushed into a long deadlock under any circumstances. We must realize not only the constitution, but also the nation's dream. The entire country and nation cannot be immersed in the mire of small-party political differences.

Those who want to be in the leadership for people-friendly, inclusive development of a democratic and just society must first look at the interests of the country and listen to the people. At the same time, we must be wary of the danger of democratic failure and lack of a representative government. The path to building a just society must also be kept smooth.

If these tasks are neglected, the political crisis will intensify and development will be interrupted. Poverty will increase, people's economic and social life will fall into a more fragile state. It will also be impossible to protect the poor. The burden of debt will increase, which will lead to new political and social crises. Needless to say, the market and inflation cannot be controlled long before the elections. Corruption has increased in society manifold and in various sectors. These are special omens.

Social stability and balanced development require a continuous transition to democracy. And that will be possible by ensuring consensus, accountability and transparency in the election system. The conflicting electoral politics of the country must therefore come to a compromise and find peaceful solutions. A neutral civil society must stand tall to stop political bickering and create favourable conditions for democracy and peaceful elections.

Conclusions

It is above all social conflicts that shape politics, its disputes and its effects on democracy. The effects can be positive or negative, depending on the degree of conflict and on its substance. As mentioned, when we see the presence of violence in democracies, the first thing that is evident is the fragile state of good governance and human rights. After the bloody civil war that led to Bangladesh's independence in 1971, in which the pro-Pakistan political armed fronts supported the Pakistani

military crackdown, the Awami League, led by Sheikh Mujibur Rehman, formed the first government. In 1972, it enacted a constitution that, like the party's founding ideology, drew on the principles of democracy, nationalism, socialism and secularism. Mujib and most of his family were killed by a small group of army personnel in the 15 August 1975 coup, inaugurating decades of authoritarian rule amidst coups and counter-coups that lasted until 1990 (Baxter, 1998). With a very short and exceptional interval, political killings and violence are very much visible in the Bangladeshi polity. To identify the causes, manifestation and consequences of political violence in Bangladesh, most analyses are based two arguments (Moniruzzaman, 2009): first, that there is a cyclical relationship between inter-party conflict, political violence, and inter-party enmity; and secondly, that inter-party conflict and violence at the horizontal level lead to political non-cooperation and stalemate at the vertical level between the ruling party and the opposition. Again, political violence emerges from a deep-rooted political culture of intolerance, antagonism, revenge and arrogance. Apparently immediate causes of political violence are in fact expressions of underlying differences and rifts along the lines of ideological, political, religious and institutional dimensions. Political violence in turn results in distrust, the institutionalisation of violence as a legitimate means of political expression, and the socialisation of violence-politics for the new generation of party loyalists.

Experts also analyse the violence perpetrated by the state in three phases. The first phase goes from 1972 to 1990, the second phase goes from 1991 to 2011, and the third phase goes from 2012 to 2018. The actors of violence are divided into two groups: government agents and government affiliates. Actors in both these groups changed during these three phases. The instruments of violence were mostly physical, on one hand, and legal, on the other, in all these three phases. A new type of instrument was noticed during the third phase: the cyber instrument. With the advent of new technologies, the state introduced various types of cyber instruments to perpetrate violence against its targets. The scopes of violence were mostly the political opposition, the press, and dissenters. The incumbent government frequently relied on coercion to confront the political opposition, alternative political ideologies, freedom of the press, and any dissent. Another novelty during the third phase regards potential dissenters. Unlike the two previous phases, the state perpetrated violence against potential dissenters so as to silence citizens even

before they express their dissension (Almamun, 2020).

While international drives for development of inclusive democracy in Bangladesh are warranted, there is a continued need to identify the underlying causes of violence. Doing so requires policy makers to escape simple explanations based on contentious divisions along religious, ethnic or ideological lines and focus more on the mundane, everyday life trajectories of members of violence-prone groups and their patronage networks. We must examine these arguably more complex cases. While efforts to introduce and promote non-violent forms of contention are appreciated, these cannot tackle the proliferation of internal violence, which lies at the heart of democratic rule in Bangladesh (Suykens and Kuttig, 2018).

Moreover, the political culture of Bangladesh goes beyond ‘healthy competition’ and is becoming more confrontational by the day. Parties prefer to solve their differences in the street rather than through a democratic political way. The party in power is found to be engaged in more violence than the opposition – which ultimately indicates that control of economic resources could be the ultimate determinant of political violence. During elections, the political factions of parties become united towards fighting against the opposition, with the ultimate aim of retaining power and thus ensuring control of resources. The lack of intra-party democratic practices, along with the absence of ideological harmony and weak institutional mechanisms, are all promoting violence in politics. Thus political parties in Bangladesh have miserably failed to establish a democratic system within their own respective parties. The party leadership has a tendency to practice dictatorship in running party affairs. In Bangladesh, a researcher (Nahar, 2017) found an under developed political culture. The nation lacks democratic political organizations, institutions and practices in a true sense. As a result, democracy in Bangladesh has almost failed. Apparently there exist some indicators for democracy, such as a parliamentary system of government, a parliamentary committee system, a multi-party system, a fair democratic constitution. However, all these indicators have been almost failed to institutionalize democracy in Bangladesh.

Furthermore, Bangladesh has a long historical legacy of political killings and electoral violence that has shaped its political culture. Since its emergence, it has experienced a series of violent political activities and an increasingly polarized political climate. In politics, society, and analogue and especially digital media, conflicts were not resolved – instead, they intensified. Protests, boycotts, and intense oppositional politics are defining features of Bangladesh’s authoritarian and democratic eras. By strengthening democratic process as well as political and social institutions, and by making them more inclusive, Bangladesh can overcome the issue. Upholding constitutionalism, rule of law, universal values of human rights, and the democratic character of Bangladesh, this problem is best addressed. Considering the complexity of politics of killing, violent democratic processes and the relative silence on the side of both academia and policy makers regarding strategies to counter such developments, it is time to implement a new research agenda that attempts, first, to understand the dynamics of violence in democracies like Bangladesh, and, second, to develop recommendations and strategies for policy stakeholders. There must be a mutual understanding-oriented discourse. Ultimately, national development is all about inclusion, not exclusion. As it is said that ‘democracy needs tolerance and dissidence. Both can hurt. If we understand this, polarisation and its profiteers will have a hard time’ (Merkel, 2023). Protests and rallies are part of democracy and should be respected. There will always be a call to create avenues for dialogue and discussion as per the desire of international development partners and the common citizenry of Bangladesh, who are deeply concerned about the political violence and repeatedly calling for a peaceful settlement of conflicts and law-abiding political activities. It is the unfortunate reality that the common citizenry by far suffered the most in Bangladesh's democratic march. The state never thought of compensating these victims. A recent report by the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED, 2023), an independent US-registered non-profit, reminds us of this lack of accountability. According to the report, the government has taken many commendable steps in providing special allowances and assistance to the poor and needy in the society. Yet it could not properly protect or redress the victims of political violence. From 2010 to 2022, there were about 14,000 incidents of violence in the country, and the rate of common citizen victims of violence is about 15 to 30 percent every year. Unfortunately, these people lack any form of government assistance. The victims

of political violence are politicized, but no effective action is taken to alleviate their plight. And in many cases, their sacrifices in political movements are not properly evaluated. Comparative data on political violence in South Asian countries shows that Bangladesh is the most affected by political animosity and conflict. Then there is the position of Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka. In recent times, Bangladesh's political antagonism has come to the fore both before and after the 2014 elections. Although some victims and their families received assistance in those incidents, this was not covered by any legal framework. Apart from the violence between rival political parties, many innocent and ordinary people in Bangladesh are affected by the conflict between different groups within the same party. Life must be given.

Any attempt to resolve any problem through negotiation is considered preferable. In fact, if the inter-existing problems can be brought to the table for discussion and solutions can be sought for, conflict and anarchy in politics are bound to decrease. In the case of Bangladesh, the relationship between various political parties, especially the Awami League and the BNP, has turned into hostility. Both democracy and development in the country are under threat. The hostile relationship between the country's two major political parties for over two decades is holding the country back. There is no doubt that this situation will end if the politics of compromise is established in the country. If the political parties work together for the nation's development and prosperity by avoiding the politics of revenge and revenge, then development will be faster and the democracy will be strengthened. This can be said for sure.

Democracy in the country may be endangered if a political crisis develops on the path of conflict-violence, which is not desired by anyone. Ordinary people are not the only victims of violent situations. The unstable political situation will have a negative impact on the government's revenue, including import-export activities and the country's trade and investments. Moreover, the fate of thousands of workers dependent on these industries will become uncertain, as various productive sectors and export-oriented industries face losses due to the violent political situation. Most importantly, investment and development will not achieve the desired success if political stability is not maintained. Keeping these issues in mind, it is expected that everyone will show tolerance for the sake of maintaining political stability in the

country. Therefore, Bangladesh's political future remains the subject of ongoing discussions, creating an atmosphere conducive to constructive debates and engagement among various stakeholders. The international community closely monitors these developments, acknowledging the nation's steadfast adherence to democratic principles and maintaining hope for a peaceful and democratic electoral process. The ultimate outcome will depend on collective efforts to ensure a free, fair, peaceful, and inclusive election – one that upholds the nation's democratic values against political killings and violence.

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